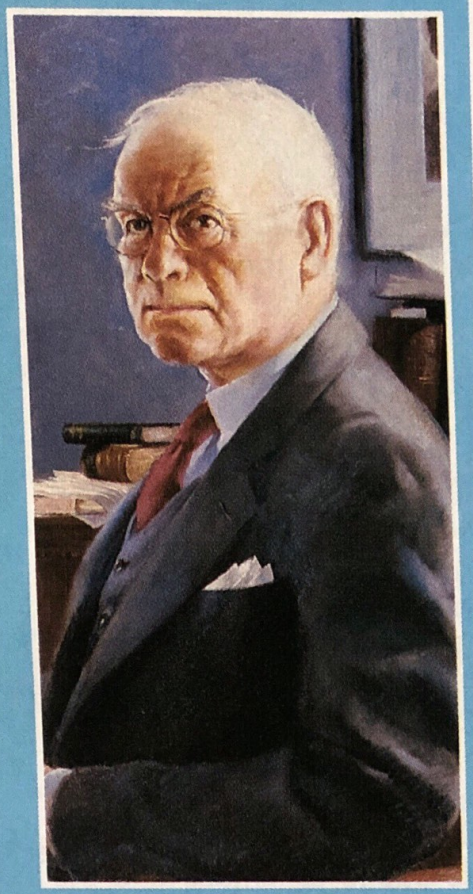
EDGAR LEE MASTERS

1868–1950



Edgar Lee Masters is primarily remembered for one volume of his poetry. Yet this volume, *Spoon River Anthology,* is widely regarded as one of the finest collections of poetry ever produced by an American poet.

Masters was born in Kansas but grew up in rural southern Illinois—the area where Abraham Lincoln had spent his early years. After briefly attending Knox College, Masters studied law in his father's law office and eventually passed the bar exam. In 1891 he moved to Chicago, where he became a successful criminal lawyer. During his spare time, he wrote poems, plays, and essays, and he published some of his poems in the highly regarded Chicago magazine *Poetry.*

Masters's early poems, which were traditional in form, received little attention. In 1914, however, Masters's direction as a poet changed dramatically when a friend gave him a copy of *Selected Epitaphs from the Greek Anthology*. This collection included many concise, interconnected epitaphs that each captured the essence of a person's life. Using this structure and abandoning conventional rhyme and meter for free verse, Masters wrote a series of poems about the lives of people in rural southern Illinois. Published under the title *Spoon River Anthology* in 1915, the series provoked strong reactions among critics and became a best seller.

Spoon River Anthology consists of 244 epitaphs for characters buried in the mythical Spoon River cemetery. The dead themselves serve as the speakers of the poems, often revealing secrets they kept hidden throughout their lifetimes. Many types of people are represented, including storekeepers, housewives, and murderers. Some of the characters had lived happy lives, but many more had lived lives filled with frustration and despair. Presented together the epitaphs paint a vivid portrait of the loneliness and isolation with which people living in the Midwest at the time were often confronted.

Poet May Swenson has commented that in *Spoon River Anthology,* Masters gave "outlet to all his grudges, beliefs, indignations, insights, prophesies, discoveries of glaring injustice, revelations of life's mysteries and paradoxes—and his own eccentric philosophy. Miraculously he also created and bequeathed to us a world in microcosm, new in form, timeless in essence."

Several years after *Spoon River Anthology* was published, Masters gave up his law practice to devote all of his energy to writing. Yet, while he was able to produce many other volumes of poetry in addition to novels, biographies, and his autobiography, *Across Spoon River,* he was never able to match the success of *Spoon River Anthology*.

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

Lucinda Matlock; Fiddler Jones

Writers' Techniques

The Speaker. The speaker is the voice of a poem. Although the speaker is often the poet, the speaker could be a fictional character, or an inanimate object, or another type of nonhuman entity. For example, the speakers in the poems in Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* are fictional characters who are buried in the mythical Spoon River cemetery. By using the characters themselves as the speakers, Masters is able to delve deeply into the characters' minds. In each poem a different speaker discusses his or her own life intimately and honestly, candidly expressing his or her most profound thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

Many of the characters are based on people Masters observed or was acquainted with during his childhood. For example, Lucinda Matlock, one of the most forceful speakers, represents Masters's own grandmother.

Focus

In *Spoon River Anthology,* Edgar Lee Masters paints portraits of a variety of characters based on people he observed during his childhood. Think of an interesting or amusing character from a book, a movie, or in the news. Then list details describing this person's appearance, personality, and behavior.

Primary Source

In his essay "The Genesis of Spoon River," Edgar Lee Masters described experiences from his youth in the Illinois towns of Petersburg and Lewiston that contributed to his writing of *Spoon River Anthology.* He then went on to describe his state of mind as he neared completion of the Spoon River poems in December 1914:

> I was nearing exhaustion of body. . . . The flame had now become so intense that it could not be seen, by which I mean that the writing of the pieces did not seem to involve any effort whatever; and yet I should have known that I was being sapped rapidly. I had no auditory or visual experiences which were not the effect of actuality; but I did feel that somehow, by these months of exploring the souls of the dead, by this unlicensed revelation of their secrets, I had convoked about my head swarms of powers and beings who were watching me and protesting and yet inspiring me to go on.
>
> I do not mean by this that I believed that I was so haunted; I only mean I had that sensation, as one in a lonely and eyrie room might suddenly feel that someone was in the next room spying upon him.

BARN DANCE, 1950
Grandma Moses
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Lucinda Matlock

Edgar Lee Masters

I went to the dances at Chandlerville,
And played snap-out[1] at Winchester.
One time we changed partners,
Driving home in the moonlight of middle June,
And then I found Davis.
We were married and lived together for seventy years,
Enjoying, working, raising the twelve children,
Eight of whom we lost
Ere I had reached the age of sixty.

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1. snap-out: A game often referred to as "crack-the whip," in which a long line of players who are holding hands spin around in a circle, causing the players on the end to be flung off by centrifugal force.

Note about art: Anna Mary Robertson Moses (1860–1961) began painting in old age and became known as "Grandma" Moses. She painted country landscapes and scenes remembered from her childhood.

I spun, I wove, I kept the house, I nursed the sick,
I made the garden, and for holiday
Rambled over the fields where sang the larks,
And by Spoon River gathering many a shell,
And many a flower and medicinal weed—
Shouting to the wooded hills, singing to the green valleys.
At ninety-six I had lived enough, that is all,
And passed to a sweet repose.
What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,
Anger, discontent and drooping hopes?
Degenerate sons and daughters,
Life is too strong for you—
It takes life to love Life.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What is your opinion of Lucinda Matlock? Is she someone you would strive to emulate? Why or why not?
2. What do you think of Lucinda's criticism of the sons and daughters she addresses? Explain.

Interpreting

3. (a) How would you characterize Lucinda Matlock's life? (b) What seems to be Lucinda Matlock's attitude concerning her life?
4. (a) Who are the "sons and daughters" Lucinda addresses in this poem? (b) What is her attitude toward them? (c) How is their attitude toward life different from her own? (d) What is the meaning of her message to them?

Applying

5. Explain whether you agree or disagree with Lucinda Matlock's message.
6. As this poem suggests, the general attitude toward life of one generation is often quite different from that of other generations. What do you think causes these differences?
7. How do you think Lucinda Matlock would respond to people who complain that life today is too complex and confusing?

Thinking and Writing

Writing an Epitaph

Imagine that you have entered a contest being held by your school literary magazine in which you are asked to write an epitaph in the style of Edgar Lee Masters. Start by reviewing the list of details you prepared that describe an interesting or amusing person. Try to decide which details best capture the essence of the person's life. Then decide what message about life the epitaph should convey. When you write the epitaph, use free verse and try to capture the flavor of the person's life in a limited number of lines. When you finish writing, put your epitaph aside for one day. Then reread it and make any necessary revisions.

Learning Option

Writing. If Edgar Lee Masters were to write your epitaph, what message about life would it convey? Sum up your philosophy in a single sentence. You might write an original statement or use a quotation that expresses your point of view.

Fiddler Jones

Edgar Lee Masters

The earth keeps some vibration going
There in your heart, and that is you.
And if the people find you can fiddle,
Why, fiddle you must, for all your life.
What do you see, a harvest of clover?
Or a meadow to walk through to the river?
The wind's in the corn; you rub your hands
For beeves hereafter ready for market;
Or else you hear the rustle of skirts
Like the girls when dancing at Little Grove.
To Cooney Potter a pillar of dust
Or whirling leaves meant ruinous drouth;[1]
They looked to me like Red-Head Sammy
Stepping it off, to "Toor-a-Loor."
How could I till my forty acres
Not to speak of getting more,
With a medley of horns, bassoons and piccolos
Stirred in my brain by crows and robins
And the creak of a windmill—only these?
And I never started to plow in my life
That someone did not stop in the road
And take me away to a dance or picnic.
I ended up with forty acres;
I ended up with a broken fiddle—
And a broken laugh, and a thousand memories,
And not a single regret.

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1. drouth: Drought.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What do you think of Fiddler Jones's life? Was he a success or a failure? Explain.
2. How do you suppose Fiddler Jones would see a glass filled halfway with water—half-empty or half-full? Explain.
3. Would you like to read Edgar Lee Masters's epitaphs for other citizens of Spoon River? Why or why not?

Recalling

4. According to Fiddler Jones, what must you do if "the people find you can fiddle"?
5. What are two explanations Fiddler Jones offers for his failures as a farmer?
6. What regrets does Fiddler Jones have about the way he lived his life?

Interpreting

7. What does Fiddler Jones mean when he comments, "The earth keeps some vibration going / There in your heart, and that is you"?
8. What examples does Fiddler Jones use to point out that there are many different ways of viewing the world?
9. How is Fiddler Jones's view of life different from that of other farmers?
10. Explain the last three lines of the poem.

Applying

11. How might you apply the lesson taught by the story of Fiddler Jones to your own life?

Analyzing Literature

Identifying the Speaker

The **speaker** is the voice of a poem. The speaker may be the poet himself or herself, or it may be a fictional character or even an inanimate object or another type of nonhuman entity. The speaker in "Fiddler Jones" is Fiddler Jones himself.

1. How would "Fiddler Jones" be different if Masters had used a different speaker?
2. Fiddler Jones and the other speakers of the poems in *Spoon River Anthology* are dead. Why might this allow them to discuss their lives more openly than if they were alive?

Thinking and Writing

Comparing and Contrasting Writers

Write an essay in which you compare and contrast Edwin Arlington Robinson's poetry with that of Edgar Lee Masters. Start by rereading the poems by Robinson and Masters in this book, noting similarities and differences in style, theme, and choice of subjects. Reread the biographies of Robinson and Masters, again noting similarities and differences between the two writers. Review your notes and prepare a thesis statement. Organize your notes according to corresponding points of contrast. Then begin writing your essay, using passages from the poems to support your argument. When you revise, make sure you have included enough supporting information.

Commentary

Spoon River Anthology shocked many critics and readers at the time of its publication. What accounted for its reception?

One factor, certainly, was its portrayal of small-town life and people. Although the subjects of many of the poems were admirable individuals, a large number were people whose lives were dominated by greed, religious narrow-mindedness, frustration, or inhumanity toward others. This negative view of small-town life and people ran contrary to popular views.

A second factor was the scandalous portrayal of some of the characters. Numerous readers found these poems distasteful and unwholesome.

Finally, Masters wrote his poems in unadorned free verse. Many critics found the poems overly blunt and graceless.